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The University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

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Sept. 28, 1992

UM RELEASES SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVEY, TASK FORCE REPORT

MISSOULA --

A University of Montana survey indicates about 8.5 percent of the University's female students were sexually assaulted, most of them off-campus, during the past academic year, and UM is implementing a broad-based plan to create a safer, more caring campus environment and increase awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault.

On Monday, Sept. 28, the University released the report of its Presidential Task Force on Rape and Sexual Assault and unveiled the implementation of that report's top two recommendations: a Sexual Assault Recovery Service to provide a safe, supportive environment for victims; and a Sexual Victimization Survey to track the extent of sexual crime against UM students.

"Both the task force report and the survey will put us in a position where we can be much more proactive to deal with this very critical issue on campus," UM President George Dennison said. "I'm pleased that this is happening, and I'm also very pleased about the opening of this new sexual assault recovery center, which will be a centerpiece in the strategy that we will use to deal with this problem."

The survey, prepared by sociology Associate Professors James Burfeind and Daniel Doyle and graduate student Janis Cooper, was mailed to 4,265 female UM students last May, and about 63 percent of those women responded to the survey. Of the 2,640 women who returned the forms, Burfeind said, 225 (8.5 percent of respondents) reported at least one incident of attempted or

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completed sexual intercourse without their consent during the 1991-92 academic year.

UM's survey is one of only a few conducted on U.S. campuses, Burfeind said, so it is difficult to compare UM's incidence of sexual assault with the incidence on other campuses. But the frequency of sexual assault indicated by UM's survey is lower than that shown in any of the four other campus surveys that were determined to be roughly comparable, he said.

"I think the University needs to be commended for doing this," Burfeind said. "I mean, we're kind of putting ourselves in a vulnerable situation, especially in terms of potential students and parents, by publicizing this kind of information. There aren't a lot of universities that have done that, that are willing to look at a hard problem."

Of those who completed the survey, 112 women (4.2 percent of the survey respondents) reported incidents of forced intercourse during the past academic year, and 174 women--6.6 percent of the respondents--reported attempted intercourse without their consent during that year. Many of the women reported both attempted and completed assaults.

The 225 women who reported assaults cited a total of 390 attempted or completed attacks, Doyle said. Women who reported more than one incident were asked to give specific information about only the most recent assault, he said, so the following survey results are based on a total of 225 incidents. Survey findings include:

■ Most of the responding women were attacked by someone they knew: 32.9 of the attackers were casually acquainted with the victims; 22.7 percent were romantic acquaintances; 19.6 percent were on a first date with the victim; 5.8 percent were husbands or live-in partners; and 1.8 percent were instructors or supervisors. Only 14.2 percent of the respondents said their attacker was a stranger.

■ Younger students were more likely to be victimized: 27 percent of the 18-year-old respondents reported an attempted or completed assault, while only 2 percent of respondents ages 29 or older reported an attack. Similarly, freshman and sophomore women reported considerably higher percentages of attack than those in higher grades.

■ Most of the attacks occurred off-campus, Burfeind said. Nearly half of the reported incidents were in a house or apartment; while 21.5 percent occurred in a UM dormitory and 6 percent happened in other campus buildings. Other reported locations include vehicles (7.2 percent), fraternity houses (4 percent), and in a parking lot, street or sidewalk (2 percent).

■ More than two-thirds of the women who were assaulted told no one about the attack, and only 5 percent reported the incident to law enforcement.

That last, "astounding" figure reflects a national trend of extremely low reporting of sexual assaults, said Dr. Nancy Fitch, UM director of Student Health Services and a Presidential Task Force member. Because of the "tremendous discrepancy between official statistics and what we believe the incidence of sexual assault is," she said, the task force made its top priority the establishment of a safe, central service to which victims of sexual assault could turn.

"We needed a highly visible, yet at the same time highly confidential or anonymous place that these women could easily access that wasn't going to judge them but would simply support them," Fitch said, and the answer to that need is the newly established Sexual Assault Recovery Service.

The service, located in the basement of the Student Health Service building, is accessible from a private entrance on the building's east side, across from the law school, Fitch said. Drop-in hours are currently limited to weekdays from 1 to 4 p.m., she said, but hours will expand

considerably after volunteer peer counselors have been trained to staff the service. More than 60 female UM students have volunteered to be peer counselors, she said, and a 10-week training process for accepted applicants will begin next week. The service's telephone line -- 243-6559 -- is already operating 24 hours a day, she said, thanks to help from the Women's Place counseling and education center.

In order to provide a non-threatening environment for female victims, Fitch said the service's drop-in center is for women only. But male victims of sexual assault can call the above number to reach a male counselor.

The task force report contains a total of 33 recommendations for actions to improve awareness of sexual assault, improve safety on campus and provide a caring environment for victims of attacks. Many of those recommendations have already been implemented or are in the process of implementation, Dean of Students Barbara Hollmann said.

"The task force report is an important document, and we are taking it very seriously," Hollmann said.

Dennison formed the task force in November, 1990, to increase campus awareness of and responsiveness to sexual assault.

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